

**GREAT MOMENTS IN SCRIPTURE: (4) “Blessed Inclusion” – a sermon by Gary Hindman, FPCUC. Scripture: Matthew 15:21-28.**

*Text: A Canaanite woman from that region came out and started shouting, ‘Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon.’ --Matthew 15:22*

This is the last in a sermon series entitled, “Great Moments in Scripture.” Inspired by the exciting Christian writer and Presbyterian minister, John Ortberg, of Menlo Park Presbyterian Church in Northern California, I have used some of John’s thoughts as a jumping-off place for these messages. They come from two books currently in area Christian bookstores and are entitled: *Everybody is Normal Till You Get to Know Them* and *God is Closer Than You Think*.

In the first sermon we looked about the story woman caught in adultery and at the way Jesus handled her accusers and her. He said to the accusers, “Let anyone among you who is without sin cast the first stone.” Jesus did not condone what she had done but neither did he condemn her. Instead he told her to go her way and sin no more and we can believe the gracious way he in which he dealt with her brought hope, healing and new life.

In the second sermon we looked at the story of Mary and Martha, two sisters with two very different temperaments. Some people think Jesus preferred the quiet and reflective Mary over the busy, over-achieving Martha but their temperaments were not the issue. The issue was discipleship and Mary had chosen the better path, to follow Jesus, to be at his feet, and, to use an old Hebrew expression, to be covered in the dust of her rabbi, Jesus. The challenge for us is to follow him also, and not just part-way but to give him our all and make him Lord of our life.

Last week we looked at the Book of Job and those times of life Ortberg calls the “winter of the soul.” Some people never trust God with the dark, heavy, challenging parts of their lives and therefore, do not realize what a blessing the Lord can be when we are down and have no other place to turn. Many times in Scripture God in Christ has given us a marvelous promise, that he will never leave or forsake us. And that is one of the lessons in Job. As Christians we also know that God has great and wonderful plans for us that go way beyond this life, plans Job could not know because of his place in history. The truth is, God is not the author of evil but can take any situation in our lives and redeem it and bless us to new spiritual riches.

**The story today is about social status.** You know what I mean...who’s in, who’s out, who’s rich, who’s poor, who’s popular, and who is not. We live under the constant burden of social status on both a conscious and an unconscious level.

These past few days we could not have seen a more graphic illustration of what I am speaking. The upper and middle classes pulled out of New Orleans in the

wake of Hurricane Katrina—they had cars and money and credit cards and the means to escape. Those left behind, for the most part, were people who could not so easily get away and so they were left to face the dire consequences.

Years ago C.S. Lewis wrote a brilliant essay about “the Inner Ring.” In every society, in every school, in every church, in every office, in every place where human beings gather there are little groups of people on the inside, in the inner ring. Some people spend a lot of time trying to get into the inner ring; others are inside and spend a lot of time trying to stay there. Once inside, they discover that there are all sorts of levels and that you are never really king of the hill, top of the heap—that there are more rings inside the ring. Others are resigned, I suppose, to a status outside the inner ring and sometimes they cry about it and other times, they laugh about it. For instance, Groucho Marx once said, “I would never join a club whose standards were so low that they would let someone like me be a member!”

There must have been a pecking order among the disciples. De Vinci picked up on this idea in his great painting *The Last Supper*, being careful to put Peter and John, Andrew, James and even Judas in strategic seats next to the Master. And you may recall James and John even approached Jesus one time to see if they could have the choice seats, one on the left and one on the right, and they even brought their ambitious mother in to persuade Jesus to their point of view, and as you might expect, when the other disciples got wind of it, they were upset!

In Bible times, many Jews thought of themselves as an “inner ring.” The most prophetic among them knew that theirs was a position not of privilege but of service; but many others were aloof and full of prejudice against any and all outsiders. Naturally, such an attitude made it next to impossible for them to do any kind of evangelism to attract others to their faith. An “inner ring” kept a lot of people from knowing the riches of the God of Israel.

In today’s passage Jesus and the disciples have come to the region of Tyre and Sidon, two cities on the Mediterranean Sea perhaps 50 miles north of modern-day Tel Aviv. While there a Canaanite woman, comes crying out to Jesus: “Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon.”

Now a most peculiar thing happens. Jesus seems to ignore her. She’s crying out in pain and agony and he does not utter a single word and at first glance we are left wondering how Jesus could be so unfeeling. It is only as the story unfolds that we see the master teacher trying to help his students learn a powerful lesson: that God desires to exclude no one.

In the silence of not answering the disciples figure Jesus is confirming the values they hold, values they learned from society from the time they were children. “Send her away,” they said, “for she keeps shouting after us.” Send her away, brush her under the carpet, just get rid of her. She’s not one of us, anyway. Jesus knows their prejudices all too well and teases them out when he finally speaks to her in their hearing: “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of

Israel.” Can’t you just hear the disciples following up on that comment? “Yea, why don’t you just go away? We have enough to do just taking care of our own; we don’t have time for outsiders like you.”

She persists, getting down on her knees and begging for she is desperate. The love of her sick child has taken away her pride and all she can think of is to get help. “Lord, help me.” As we read the passage and our mind wonders ahead we are thinking, “Surely Jesus will help her now.” But the master teacher knows how deep and powerful and destructive is the nature of prejudice, how powerful and enticing the fellowship of the inner ring can be and so he continues to let the situation twist in the wind and plays on the worst side of his disciples’ attitudes. “It is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.” Again, I can well imagine what the disciples are thinking. “Right on, Jesus. These Canaanites are a bunch of dogs and we have better things to do than to waste time on this pitiful heathen!” But the woman would not give up. In fact, she took his terms and used them to her advantage: “Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master’s table.” With that Jesus did what he probably intended to do all along: he granted her wish. “Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.” And with that, her daughter was healed instantly. But something else happened along the way: the disciples were given a powerful lesson in inclusion, a lesson they would not fully understand until much later, until they witnessed the radical nature of God’s desire to include everyone, a desire that manifested in the suffering cross and a glorious resurrection.

We live in an incredible age. Last week I misplaced some forms I needed so I just went on line, hit a couple of buttons and found myself inside the admissions office of a university, and downloaded their forms. Now all I have to do is fill them out and fax them back. Presto, keeno!

One of the tragedies among those stranded in Louisiana was that all modern means of communication was knocked out. We could watch the relief efforts on television but there was no way of telling the victims of Hurricane Katrina that help was coming. You wanted to shout to them, “Hey, hang in there, food and water and a means of evacuation are on the way.” In short, they were stranded *and without hope*.

That’s what exclusivity does, too--it robs us of hope. It puts people in a box. It causes insiders and outsiders, ins and outs, and issues of “we and they”. The disciples were so convinced that they were comfortably in the inner ring that they did not want to bother with anyone else. But all along, though they did not want to see it, the woman, this outsider, showed more faith than any of them. Jesus knew it and he knew that if they were ever to serve his radically inclusive Kingdom, they would have to change their ways.

For a brief time Jesus concealed the goodness of his heart toward her. He did it for the greater good—to teach an essential lesson. But finally, he turned away from them and faced her head on with a profound compliment.

The Greek has a tiny little omicron that is left out of our translation but it is very important. He did not say, "Woman, great is your faith." He said, "O Woman, great is your faith." He said, "Wow, O woman, your faith is awesome!"

The faith of this one whom they thought was an outcast, an outsider, a loser, was great and amazing, worthy of being lifted up for all to see. And it underscores a truth about our great Triune God and it is this: God is determined to share the great circle of love he has, with every man, woman and child. God is, to use John Ortberg's phrase, "shamelessly, ceaselessly inclusive." No one is left out except those who refuse to enter.

And when we catch the joy of being invited to the party, when we have the joy of really meeting someone face-to-face on the plain of brotherhood and sisterhood, when we draw the circle big and round, we discover what God has in mind for us—the beatitude of knowing, deep in our heart, that it is so very good for us to dwell together in unity.

And that brings me back to my prayer to today. That the kind of radical inclusion and concern and care that God has for everyone will spill over to the way we, as Americans, will care for those less fortunate. May we all band together in this time of challenge and tragedy in the Gulf states, and show a heart of love and compassion for as we do, we will all be blessed and enriched, as surely as were a desperate woman and some prejudiced disciples long ago, along the shores of the Mediterranean sea.